



Georgia aster, credit TNC-GA/Michele Elmore

red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA).

- Line Transect Distance Sampling (LTDS) was adopted by all public agencies as the standard protocol for surveying tortoise populations. States, especially Georgia, are working with private landowners to use LTDS to determine populations for a better assessment of the population range-wide.
- The Gopher Tortoise Council, a 501(c)3 organization, released a report in July 2013 that recommends a recommended minimum viable population size. The report is available at www.gophertortoisecouncil.org.
- Florida has proposed management plans for state-listed species that intersect candidate and petitioned species and commensal species with gopher tortoises. The state is also working on Desired Future Conditions and Best Management Practices for a suite of state-listed species, and developing conservation measures that

can be inserted into any conservation agreement. In addition, a major MOU was signed with phosphate mining company for easements to protect gopher tortoise habitat.

A History of Success

Over the years, the Service and its partners have been able to conserve dozens of at-risk species and preclude the need to list them under the ESA. In the Southeast, by working closely with states, other federal agencies, private landowners, non-governmental organizations and many other partners, the Service has been able to remove the label “candidate for federal listing” from the Florida black bear, Adams cave beetles in Kentucky, the Camp Shelby burrowing crayfish, the Yadkin River goldenrod and the Georgia aster.



Robust redhorse, credit Georgia Department of Natural Resources

To date, 61 species have been removed from candidate status or from petitions.

Next Steps

Working in partnership with SEAFWA, the Service will continue to focus conservation on priority at-risk species using the full range of tools available for conservation. In cooperation with SEAFWA and Connecting Conservation, the Service is working to improve the At-Risk Species Finder, a searchable database widely used by partners and the public to identify the status, location, range, and field office contacts for at-risk species in the region. Finder 2.0 will launch later in 2016.

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/finder.html>

This tool will provide a convenient way to track information and progress on at-risk species.

For More Information

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Conserving the Southeast's At-Risk Species

Listing not needed for 61 species

“Private landowners are wonderful stewards of the Southeast’s grand diversity of fish, wildlife and plants. Our goal is to work closely with them – and our public partners – to proactively conserve as many at-risk species as possible through voluntary and innovative measures. Together we can pass down our outdoor traditions to future generations of Americans, and help keep farms, forests and other lands working for both people and wildlife.”

Cindy Dohner, Southeast Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In 2011, the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began working with states, federal agencies and other partners to evaluate 496 fish, wildlife and plant species for potential listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). These evaluations are required due to litigation and petitions. The goal is to preclude the need to list as many at-risk species as possible through proactive, voluntary conservation relying on the best available science.



The Service determined North Carolina’s Blue Ridge gray-cheeked salamander does not require federal protection, credit John P. Clare.

Our Goal

We seek to work with private and public partners to protect working lands and our outdoor heritage by precluding the need to federally list as many at-risk species as possible through voluntary proactive conservation.

To achieve this goal, the Service and its partners must:

- Prioritize species and target resources (partners, staff time, and funding) to focus proactive conservation actions on those areas that will have the greatest benefit to at-risk species,
- Conduct essential research and surveys to determine the habitat and life history requirements of priority at-risk species,
- Promote voluntary conservation using existing tools and programs, and explore new ways to provide regulatory flexibility and predictability to landowners for proactive conservation actions,

- Enhance and improve data sharing among States, the Service, the Forest Service, and others and
- Conduct outreach to inform and move people, partners and stakeholders to take action.

Definition of At-Risk Species

As the Service develops proactive conservation strategies with partners for at-risk species, the states’ Species of Greatest Conservation Need (defined as species with low or declining populations) will also be considered. Biologists commonly refer to species as “at-risk” if they face grave threats to their survival. For the purposes of this conservation strategy, the Service’s Southeast Region has defined “at-risk species” as those that are:

- Proposed for listing under the ESA by the Service;
- Candidates for listing under the ESA, which means they are in the queue to be listed; or

- Petitioned for listing under the ESA, which means a citizen or group has requested that the Service review their status to determine if they need ESA's protection.

Partnering with Southeastern States

Fifteen southeastern states, working through the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA), are leading the effort to conserve at-risk species. Working with the Service, SEAFWA is addressing the information needs and conservation of at-risk species, achieving an unprecedented level of cooperation among the states, private landowners, other federal agencies and the business community. They are categorizing at-risk species to plan conservation actions and set priorities for surveys and conservation agreements.

Southeast At-Risk Species Program

The Southeast At-Risk Species (SEARS) Program focuses on collaborative conservation of species at-risk. Implemented by the SEAFWA's Wildlife Diversity Committee in cooperation with the Service and Wildlife Management Institute, the goal is to preclude the need to list species under the ESA. SEARS establishes a mechanism through which States can collaborate on range-wide surveys and conservation projects for at-risk species.

States within SEAFWA have pooled State Wildlife Grant Funds and other funds to support coordinated status assessments and conservation projects for at-risk species. This information will inform status assessments and conservation programs for these species.

Projects with Federal Agencies

Partnerships such as the Southeast Natural Resources Leadership Group (SENRLG) and the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS) are developing approaches to conserve at-risk species while offering greater regulatory flexibility and predictability to federal agencies.

The Service is working through the SERPPAS At-Risk Species Issue Team to develop methods that could be applicable nationwide such as a candidate conservation credit or pre-listing mitigation system for gopher tortoises to provide credits that may be used to offset impacts if the species later becomes listed. The Service is



Longleaf pine ecosystem, credit USFWS/Randy Browning

finalizing new flexibility that would provide landowners, government agencies and others incentives to carry out voluntary conservation actions for non-listed species before they are listed. The new policy would allow the benefits to species by such actions to mitigate or serve as a compensatory measure for the detrimental effects of another action undertaken after a species is listed.

Candidate Conservation Agreements

CCAs are signed to benefit a variety of species. In 2015, two Candidate Conservation Agreements were signed, for example, with the Forest Service and other partners. In Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to take actions to conserve the Elfin woods warbler, and in August an agreement was signed to conserve the Kentucky arrow darter in Daniel Boone National Forest.

A Candidate Conservation Agreement for the Sickleaf Redhorse was signed in February 2016.

Working with Private Landowners

The Service's Southeast Region recognizes the enormous contribution private landowners make to wildlife conservation. From the gopher tortoise in open pine forests, to the darter fish found in the riffles of mountain streams, the abundance and diversity of species found only in the Southeast are largely due to the conservation ethic of private landowners and the efforts of the states' fish and wildlife agencies.

The Service also recognizes that the majority of lands in the Southeast are privately owned and include habitat for federally listed and at-risk species. To more fully engage private landowners in managing their lands and waters to benefit these species, the Service has developed several voluntary tools that

both protect private land interests and provide incentives. These tools, which include conservation agreements and conservation banks or mitigation lands, can be used in combinations to cover both listed and at-risk species.

Early conservation — before a species requires listing under the ESA — maximizes management options for landowners, minimizes the costs, and reduces the potential or need for more restrictive activities by addressing the needs of the species before regulatory requirements come into play.

Reese Thompson is a Georgia landowner who's making a difference one tree at a time. A sixth generation Georgian, he's been planting trees for 42 years. "I'm the guy that rides the tree planter. I thoroughly enjoy planting trees, in my mind that's the closest to immortality I'm ever going to get. I have trees that my grandfather planted, and a son and a daughter that help me plant trees," said Thompson.

Thompson is quick to acknowledge that it takes teamwork to make this dream work:

"A wise man once said if you see a turtle sitting on fence post (in this instance a gopher tortoise) he didn't get there by himself. In

a sense I'm that gopher tortoise. All of my good work is the result of help, assistance and knowledge that I've gained from other conservation-minded people and organizations. I can't say enough good things about USFWS, Georgia DNR and NRCS. Any good work I do is a joint effort."

Partners for Wildlife (PFW) Pilot – Longleaf Pine in Alabama and Georgia

A \$200,000 Landscape Pilot for the Partners for Wildlife program is being implemented with private landowners. The programmatic Section 7 biological opinion/conference opinion in the historic range of longleaf pine in Alabama and Georgia will link 30-year PFW agreements to incidental take evaluation for at-risk species. We intend to work toward regulatory predictability for landowners.

Focusing Conservation on the Right Places

In 2015, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, in cooperation with the Service, completed a project to identify conservation opportunities for at-risk species on National Wildlife Refuges. The report from this project is available at: <https://griffingroups.com/file/view/348582/southeast-at-risk-species-phase-i-report>

With support from the U.S. Forest Service, the NWRA and Service are engaged in a parallel project to identify conservation opportunities for at-risk species on National Forests, Department of Defense installations and other public lands. Information from this project will help the Service and partners identify places where conservation efforts can be focused for at-risk species.

Voluntary Conservation with Private Organizations

The Service has met with thousands of individuals representing utilities such as the Southern Company (Alabama Power, Georgia Power, Mississippi Power and Gulf Power), forest landowners and managers (Forest Landowners Association, Georgia Forestry Association, Plum Creek, Rayonier, Southern Group of State Foresters), and coal mining interests in Kentucky.

Together we are working on opportunities for proactive, voluntary conservation, as well as innovative new methods to document effective conservation on



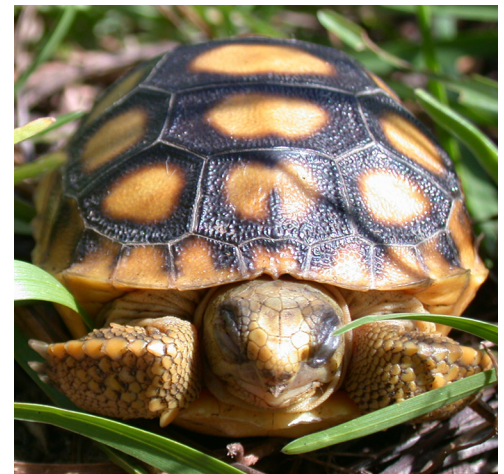
Chowanoke crayfish, credit NCWRC

private lands that may preclude the need to list species.

Gopher Tortoise

The Service, in collaboration with Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina, completed the Range-Wide Conservation Strategy for the Gopher Tortoise in May 2013. With six objectives to minimize threats and hopefully preclude the need to list the species in its eastern range, the strategy includes teams co-lead by the Service and states. Some of the accomplishments achieved so far as a result of the strategy are described here:

- Since 2012, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Working Lands



Gopher tortoise, credit FWC/Renee Rau

for Wildlife program has provided over \$24 million in funding to manage lands in the gopher tortoise's range, affecting nearly 280,000 acres.

- Tall Timbers Research Station is working with the Service, Florida and Georgia on a programmatic CCAA for the gopher tortoise and commensals for landowners already enrolled in the



Elfin-woods warbler, credit USFWS